DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 836 PS 027 142

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TITLE	Teaching Young Children To Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do.
INSTITUTION	National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1989-00-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426; Tel: 800-424-1426 (Toll Free); Tel: 202-232-8777; Fax: 202-328-1846; Web site: http://www.naeyc.org; e-mail: naeyc@naeyc.org (NAEYC Order No. 565, $0.50 each; 100 copies, $10. (Also available in a Spanish version.)
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Bias; *Childhood Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Influence; Parent Participation; *Parent Role; Parenting Skills; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Social Bias; Social Discrimination
IDENTIFIERS	Antibias Practices; *Bias Elimination Procedures

ABSTRACT

Based on research indicating that children between ages 2 and 5 become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities, this brochure attempts to assist parents in dealing with misconceptions, discomfort, fear, and rejection of differences that may develop into prejudice in their young children. The brochure argues that bias adversely influences young children by creating obstacles to healthy identity development and that avoidance by parents only serves to allow children to absorb society's biases. The brochure advises parents to: (1) recognize that bias exists; (2) create a bias free environment; (3) provide diverse images; (4) value diversity; (5) disapprove of judging others by how they look; (6) initiate activities and discussion to build self-identify; (7) talk positively about all physical characteristics and cultural identities; (8) help children learn; (9) provide opportunities for meaningful interactions; (10) listen to and answer children's questions; (11) teach children how to challenge biases; (12) teach children to recognize biases; (13) use accurate and fair images; (14) let children know that they can change injustice; and (15) involve children in taking action. The brochure also provides advice on helping children deal with bias, and notes common questions that parents, teachers, and children ask in this sensitive area and how to address them. (SD)

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ED 425 836

Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do

Marilyn Smith

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Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do

OVER THE COURSE of the preschool years, children are developing their own self-identity and their ideas about others. They are gradually figuring out that they are *like* other people in many ways and *different* in others. Children's learning experiences in these early years can help them to form a strong, positive self-concept and grow up to respect and interact comfortably with people different from themselves. Without such learning experiences, children are very likely to succumb to the biases that pervade our society and result in unfair treatment of many people.

Research tells us that between ages 2 and 5, children become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities. They also become sensitive to both the positive attitudes and negative biases attached to these four key aspects of identity, by their family and by society in general. Young children develop "pre-prejudice": misconceptions, discomfort, fear, and rejection of differences that may develop into real prejudice if parents and teachers do not intervene.

"Girls aren't strong." "Boys can't play house."

"You're a baby in that wheelchair; you can't walk."

"You can't play with us, only light-skinned kids can."

Many adults find it hard to accept that 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds actually make these kind of comments. They would prefer to believe that young children are blissfully unaware of the differences between people upon which prejudice and discrimination are based. But young children not only recognize differences, they also absorb values about which differences are positive and which are not. How we as parents and teachers react to the ideas that young children express will greatly affect the feelings they will form. If we want children to like themselves and to value diversity, then we must learn how to help them resist the biases and prejudice that are still far too prevalent in our society.

How bias influences children's development

Bias based on gender, race, disability, or social class creates serious obstacles to all young children's healthy development. When areas of experience are gender stereotyped and closed to children simply because of their sex, neither boys nor girls are fully prepared to deal intellectually or emotionally with the realities and demands of everyday life. Children with disabilities are severely harmed if their access to the educational experiences necessary for well-rounded development is limited. Children without disabilities also lose out when they are prevented from knowing and comfortably interacting with different types of people.

For children to like themselves and to value diversity, we must help them resist the biases and prejudice that are still far too prevalent in our society.

Racism attacks the very sense of self for children of color. It creates serious obstacles to their obtaining the best education, health care, and employment. Racism also teaches White children a false identity of superiority and distorts their perceptions of reality. Thus they are not equipped to fairly and productively interact with more than half of the world's humanity.

The "isms" interfere as well with our ability as adults to effectively teach children about themselves and others. All of us have learned the negative values attached to gender, race, class, and disabilities. And, to varying degrees, they make us uncomfortable as they affect our personal attitudes and behavior. At times, we hide such negative feelings from ourselves by denying the reality or significance of differences. We may hope to

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sidestep the impact of prejudice by saying, "people are all the same," or teaching children it is impolite to notice or ask about differences. However, avoidance doesn't give children the information they need. By selectively ignoring children's natural curiosity, we actually teach them that some differences are not acceptable. And by failing to attach positive value to certain specific differences, children are left to absorb the biases of society. The more we face our own prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes toward diversity and change them, the better prepared we will be to foster children's growth.

What parents and teachers can do

Recognize that because we live in a society with pervasive biases, we must actively foster children's anti-bias development. Remember that in such an environment, we are all constantly and repeatedly exposed to messages that subtly reinforce biases. If we do nothing to counteract them, then we silently support these biases by virtue of our inactivity.

Create an environment at home or at school that deliberately contrasts the prevailing biased messages of the wider society.

Provide books, dolls, toys, wall decorations (paintings, drawings, photographs), TV programs, and records that reflect diverse images that children may not likely see elsewhere in

- gender roles (including men and women in nontraditional roles),
- racial and cultural backgrounds (e.g., people of color in leadership positions),
- capabilities (people with disabilities doing activities familiar to children), and
- family lifestyles (varieties of family composition and activities).

Show that you value diversity in the friends you choose and in the people and firms you choose for various services (e.g., doctor, dentist, car mechanic, teachers, stores). Remember that what you do is as important as what you say.

Make it a firm rule that a person's identity is never an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting them. Immediately step in if you hear or see your child engage in such behavior. Make it clear that you disapprove, but do not make your child feel rejected. Support the child who has been hurt. Try to find out what underlies the biased behavior. If the reason is a conflict about another issue, help your child understand the real reason for the conflict and find a way to resolve it. If the underlying reason is discomfort with or fear or ignorance about the other child's differences, plan to initiate activities to help overcome negative feelings.

Initiate activities and discussions to build positive self-identity and to teach the value of differences among people. Educate yourself about common stereotypes in our society so that you can evaluate your selection of children's materials and experiences. Whenever possible, either remove those containing biased messages, or learn to use such material to teach children about the difference between "fair" and "true" images and those that are "unfair" and "untrue" and which hurt people's feelings.

Talk positively about each child's physical characteristics and cultural heritage. Tell stories about people from your ethnic group of whom you are especially proud. Include people who have stood up against bias and injustice. Encourage children to explore different kinds of materials and activities that go beyond traditional gender behaviors.

Help children learn the differences between feelings of superiority and feelings of self-esteem and pride in their heritage.

Provide opportunities for children to interact with other children who are racially/culturally different from themselves and with people who have various disabilities.

Nancy P. Alexander

Encourage children to explore different kinds of materials and activities that go beyond traditional gender behaviors.

If your neighborhood does not provide these opportunities, search for them in school, after-school activities, weekend programs, places of worship, and day camps. Visit museums and attend concerts and cultural events that reflect diverse heritages as well as your own.

Respectfully listen to and answer children's questions about themselves and others. Do not ignore questions, change the subject, sidestep, or admonish the child for asking a question. These responses suggest that what a child is asking is bad. However, do not *over-respond*. Answer all questions in a direct, matter-of-fact, and brief manner. Listen carefully to what children want to know *and* what they are feeling.

Teach children how to challenge biases about who they are. By the time children are 4 years old, they become aware of biases directed against aspects of their identity. This is especially true for children of color, children with disabilities, and children who don't fit stereotypic gender norms. Be sensitive to children's feelings about themselves and immediately respond when they indicate any signs of being affected by biases. Give your children tools to confront those who act biased against them.

Teach children to recognize stereotypes and caricatures of different groups. Young children can become adept at spotting "unfair" images of themselves and others if they are helped to think critically about what they see in books, movies, greeting cards, and comics and on TV.

Use accurate and fair images in contrast to stereotypic ones, and encourage children to talk about the differences. For example, at Thanksgiving time many greeting cards feature a stereotypic image of an "Indian" child with buckskins and feather headdress. Talk about how it is hurtful to people's feelings to portray them inaccurately. Read good children's books to show the reality and the variety of Native American peoples. As children get older, you can also help them learn about how stereotypes are used to justify injustice, such as lower wages, poor housing and education, etc.

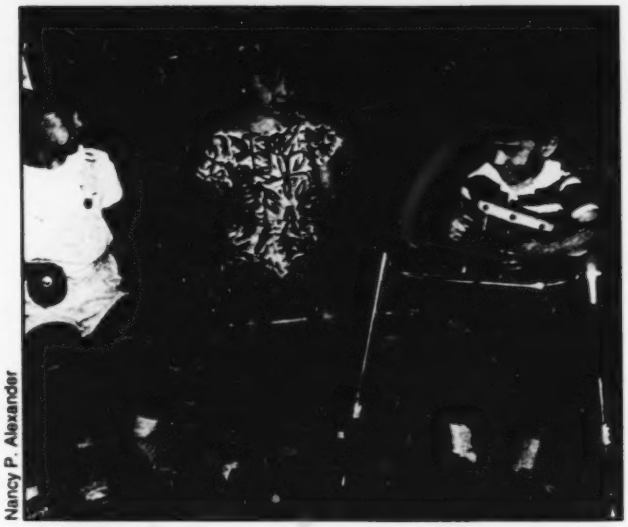
Helping children to deal with bias

Lisa, Peter, and Elana are playing hospital when Lisa's dad hears an argument break out over who will be the doctor and who will be the patient. Lisa finally says, "I don't want to be your friend anymore, you stupid Mexican!" Lisa's dad intervenes. "Lisa, what you just said is mean and it hurts Elana." Putting his arm around Elana's shoulders, he says, "I am sorry Lisa said that to you." Turning to all three children, he asks, "What is the problem?" Each child explains her side. Dad says, "Sounds like the real problem is that you both want to be the doctor. That has nothing to do with Elana being Mexican. Elana, who you are is just fine, just like who you, Lisa, and you, Peter, are is also just fine. But you all have a problem with taking turns. How can you work that out?"

Another step would need to happen if the scenario were somewhat different. For instance: Elana and her family have just moved into the neighborhood, and Lisa's parents invite them over for a visit. When they arrive, Lisa refuses to play with Elana in her room. After the family leaves, Lisa says, "I don't like them. Mexicans are stupid!" "I wonder why you think that?" her mom asks. "That's what my friend Cindy says." To which Lisa's mom replies, "Lisa, Cindy is wrong! To say that Mexicans are stupid is unfair and hurtful. Mexican people are just as smart as everyone else. Tomorrow, let's go to the library and get some books about Mexican-Americans so that we can learn more about them. We want you to get to know Elana and her family because they are our neighbors."

One evening, after watching his favorite TV show, Mark (age 4) says, "I wish I wasn't Black." "Why?" asks his mother. "Cause I want to be a paramedic." "You think you have to be White to be a paramedic because that's what you saw on TV, isn't it?" Seeing Mark nod yes, his mother says, "Even though you saw only White paramedics on TV, there are many African-American paramedics, firefighters, and police officers. You can be anything you want when you grow up. You know, there should be more African Americans on many TV shows. Some people who write the stories and own TV stations are not being fair. They are allowing racism to exist. Let's write a letter to the TV station and say that it should show paramedics, firefighters, and all kinds of people of all colors on TV." (Derman-Sparks, Hilga, and Sparks 1980)

"Heather wouldn't let me play house with her at school today," complains 5-year-old Miriam to her father. "She says I act like a boy because I like boy things." "I'm sorry that happened. How did you feel?" "It hurt my feelings and made me mad." "I would feel that way too. You know, Heather is wrong. You don't act like a boy. You act like a girl who likes to play with blocks and trucks and to play ball."



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Because we live in a society with strongly entrenched biases, we must actively foster children's anti-bias development.

Let children know that unjust things can be changed. Encourage children to challenge bias, and give them skills appropriate to their age level. First set an example by your own actions. Intervene when children engage in discriminatory behavior, support your children when they challenge bias directed against themselves and others, encourage children to identify and think critically about stereotypic images, and challenge adult-biased remarks and jokes—all methods of modeling anti-bias behavior.

Involve children in taking action on issues relevant to their lives.

- Talk to a toy store manager or owner about adding more toys that reflect diversity, such as dolls, books, and puzzles.
- Ask your local stationery store to sell greeting cards that show children of color.
- Take your child to a rally about getting more funding for child care centers.

As you involve children in this type of activity, be sure to discuss the issues with them, and talk about the reasons for taking action.

Summary

Keep in mind that developing a healthy identity and understanding of others is a long-term process. While the early years lay an essential foundation, learning continues throughout childhood and into adulthood and will take many different forms. Children will change their thinking and feelings many times.

Common questions that parents and teachers ask

Q: "My child never asks questions about race, disabilities, or gender. If I raise them myself, will I introduce her to ideas she wouldn't have thought of on her own?"

A: Yes, you may, thereby expanding your child's awareness and knowledge. Your child may also have had questions for which she didn't have words or didn't feel comfortable raising until you brought up the subject. Remember that children do not learn prejudice from open, honest discussion of differences and the unfairness of bias. Rather, it is through these methods that children develop anti-bias sensitivity and behavior.

Q: "I don't feel competent to deal with these issues; I don't know enough. What if I say the wrong thing?"

A: Silence "speaks" louder than we realize, sending messages that are counter to the development of anti-bias attitudes. It is far better to respond, even if, upon hindsight, you wish you had handled the incident differently. You can always go back to your child and say, "Yesterday, when you asked me about why Susie uses a wheelchair, I didn't give you enough of an answer. I've thought about your question some more, and today I want to tell you. . . ." If you really do not have the information to answer a question, you can say, "That's a good question, but I don't know the answer right now. Let me think about it a little and I will tell you later." Or, "Let's go find some books to help us answer your question." Then be sure to follow through.

Examine your own feelings about the subject raised by your child's questions or behaviors. Feelings of incompetence often come from discomfort rather than a lack of knowledge. Talk over your feelings with a sympathetic family member or friend in order to be better prepared the next time.

Q: "I don't want my children to know about prejudice and discrimination until they have to. Won't it upset them to know about injustices?"

A: It is natural to want to protect our children from painful subjects and situations. Moreover, adults may mask their own pain by choosing not to address issues of bias with their children. Avoiding issues that may be painful doesn't help children. Being unprepared to deal effectively with life's realities only leaves them more vulnerable and exposed to hurt. Silence about children's misconceptions and discriminatory behavior gives them permission to inflict pain on others. It is alright for children to sometimes feel sad or upset as long as they know that you are there to comfort and support them.

Common questions children ask and ways to respond

"Why is that girl in a wheelchair?"

Inappropriate

"Shh, it's not nice to ask." (admonishing)
"I'll tell you another time." (sidestepping)
Acting as if you didn't hear the question. (avoiding)

Appropriate

"She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around."

"Why is Jamal's skin so dark?"

Inappropriate

"His skin color doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath."

This response denies the child's question, changing the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.

Appropriate

"Jamal's skin is dark brown because his mother/dad (or birth mom/dad) had dark brown skin."

This is enough for 2- or 3- year olds. As children get older, you can add an explanation of melanin:

"We all have a special chemical in our skin called *melanin*. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you have only a little, your skin is light. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs."

"Why am I called Black? I'm brown!"

Inappropriate

"You are *too* Black!"

This response is not enough. It doesn't address the child's confusion between actual skin color and the name of the racial and/or ethnic group.

Appropriate

"You're right; your skin color *is* brown. We use the name *Black* to mean the group of people of whom our family is a part. Black people can have different skin colors. We are all one people because our great-great-grandparents once came from a place called Africa. That's why many people call themselves *African Americans."*

"Will the brown wash off in the tub?"

This is a fairly common question because children are influenced by the racist equation of dirtiness and dark skin in our society.

Inappropriate

Taking this as an example of "kids say the darndest things" and treating it as not serious.

Appropriate

"The color of José's skin will never wash off. When he takes a bath the dirt on his skin washes off, just like when you take a bath. Whether we have light or dark skin, we all get dirty but our skin stays the same color after we wash it. Our skin is clean after we wash, no matter what color it is."

"Why does Miyoko speak funny?"

Inappropriate

"Miyoko can't help how she speaks. Let's not say anything about it."

This response implies agreement with the child's comment that Miyoko's speech is unacceptable, while also telling the child to "not notice," and be polite.

Appropriate

"Miyoko doesn't speak funny, she speaks *differently* than you do. She speaks Japanese because that's what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It is okay to ask questions about what Miyoko is saying, but it is *not* okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings."

"Why do I have to try out that dumb wheelchair? . . ."

. . . asks Julio who refuses to sit in a child-sized wheelchair in the children's museum.

Inappropriate

"It is not dumb. All the children are trying it and I want you to."

This response does not help uncover the feelings underlying Julio's resistance and demands that he do something that is clearly uncomfortable for him.

Appropriate

Putting his arm around Julio, his dad gently asks, "Why is it dumb?" Julio: "It will hurt my feet, just like Maria's feet." Dad: "Maria can't walk because she was born with a condition called *cerebral palsy*. The wheelchair helps her move around. Nothing will happen to your legs if you try sitting and moving around in the wheelchair. It's okay if you don't want to, but if you do try it you'll find out that your legs will still be fine."

Children can learn to become anti-biased!

We can all take heart from examples such as the following examples of 4- and 5-year-olds challenging racism: Kiyoshi (age 4½) sees a stereotypic "Indian warrior" figure in the toy store. "That toy hurts Indians' feelings," he points out to his grandmother.

Casey (age 5) and another White friend, Tommy, are playing. Casey calls two other boys to join them. "You can't play with them, they're Black," Tommy says to him. Casey replies, "That's not right. Black and White kids should play together. My Dad tells me civil rights stories."

After hearing the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, Tiffany (age 5½), whose skin is light brown, ponders whether she would have had to sit in the back of the bus. Finally, she firmly asserts, "I'm Black, and anyway all this is stupid. I would just get off the bus and tell them to keep their old bus."

Kiyoshi, Casey, and Tiffany are learning to think critically and to speak up when they believe something is unfair. They are becoming "empowered": gaining the confidence and skills that will enable them to resist and challenge bias and to participate in the creation of a more just society.

For further reading

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A Spanish version of this brochure is also available—Cómo enseñar a los niños a combatir los prejuicios: El papel de los padres. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are $10. NAEYC order #564.

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